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SUBJECT: ANKARA'S MAMAK DISTRICT: VOICES OF ANKARA'S HAVE NOTS

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¶1. (SBU) Summary. A visit to one of Ankara's oldest squatter settlements provided insight into the multiple challenges Turkey faces in dealing with its endemic squatter housing problem, which is linked to persistent regional income disparities and the country's deep urban and rural poverty. Residents of the Mamak district told us the GOT's efforts to move people out of single-story squatter dwellings into high rise apartments may, among other things, diminish contact between different religious and ethnic groups that currently live in -- and get along with each other in -- the city's many "gecekondus." Residents also worry whether the municipality will make good on earlier promises regarding title deeds and apartment sizes. The recent construction of a giant mosque in a predominantly Alevi neighborhood of Mamak has angered many residents and could highlight political differences among ethnic groups during parliamentary elections later this year. End Summary.

A TALE OF TWO NEIGHBORS: ALEVI AND SUNNI

¶2. (SBU) Mamak, an impoverished district of northeast Ankara with approximately 500,000 inhabitants, is representative of the capital's numerous squatter settlements, and to a large degree mirrors the cultural diversity of Turkey in general. Over the past fifteen years, Bilkent Political Science Professor Tahire Erman has spent thousands of hours in Ankara's squatter areas, predominantly in the Mamak district, interviewing hundreds of residents and researching squatter issues ranging from migrant residents' perceptions of urban living to the effects of social exclusion of squatter youth. While visiting a predominantly Alevi neighborhood of Mamak, Erman introduced Econoff to two Mamak families, one Sunni and one Alevi, with whom she has established close ties during the course of her research.

¶3. (SBU) Although large parts of the Mamak district have been transformed slowly from mainly single-story residences to uniform apartment complexes over the past five years, the area we visited retained a distinctive village-like quality. Nestled among similar crude dwellings and perched on the edge of the Imrahar Valley, a modern Ankara skyline visible in the distance, the Sunni family's modest single-story residence previously housed an Alevi family as well. Sharing a wood burning stove and kitchen area, each family enjoyed small separate living quarters until the Alevi family moved to a nearby rental property last year. The Alevis' new landlord uses rental income from two squatter properties to finance monthly payments on the apartment she purchased, a common trend among former

squatters.

¶4. (SBU) Stricken recently with bone cancer, the Sunni mother of two small kids reflected on her good fortune to have a husband with a regular monthly salary and a father-in-law employed as a gardener at the municipality. Her husband pays out-of-pocket for her chemotherapy at a private doctor's office, an expense not covered by social security. Relying on the generosity of neighbors and her elderly mother to assist with child care and cooking, she remained nevertheless optimistic about her family's future. The Alevi mother of a teenage girl expressed a desire to establish a women's caf in the neighborhood, as a counterpart to the traditional men's tea houses, for socializing and to promote women's issues. As the wife a taxi driver whose husband pays more than half his income to her uncle who owns the taxi, she supplements their household income by selling hand-made purses and socks.

¶5. (SBU) No longer housemates, the Alevi and Sunni families nevertheless remain close, and despite their divergent political and religious views (the Alevi community in Mamak tend to support left-of-center secularist parties while the Sunni generally support the ruling Justice and Development Party), a common respect was evident. Strictly observant Muslims, the Sunni female household members openly discussed the propriety of their uncovered Alevi counterparts, comments the Alevi women merely shrugged off with a smile. Professor Erman noted that being a good neighbor was generally the norm in the squatter areas she has researched, and that close ties among families in places like Mamak often transcend ethnic and religious identities. Living in close proximity to one another with minimal privacy creates a sense of community that residents and academics fear will be lost through the construction of high rise apartment buildings.

TRANSFORMATION NOT WITHOUT CONTROVERSY

¶6. (SBU) The target of urban improvement projects in the late 1990s,

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Mamak has undergone gradual transformation. Surveying the various neighborhoods, Professor Erman pointed to new eight-story apartment buildings where until a year ago there had been traditional squatter residences. Erman noted that Mamak was abuzz over title deeds and apartment sizes after Ankara's mayor spoke to residents in 2002, at which time there was strong opposition to rumored plans for all residents to receive the same size apartments. Erman explained that because the plot sizes were fixed pursuant to the municipality's development plan, squatters must agree on the number of apartments to which each family is entitled prior to construction of new buildings, and achieving consensus among residents has been problematic.

¶7. (SBU) The principal authority in the neighborhood is the muhtar, elected to a five-year term and responsible for supervising the planning and operation of communal projects and services as well as the administration of directives from higher authorities. Although an Alevi from a Kurdish region in Turkey, the elected muhtar with whom we met keeps his personal origin to himself, describing it as potentially divisive. He and several of the local elders commented on the recent construction of an enormous mosque a stone's throw from the muhtar's office, explaining that the mosque's owner, a local contractor involved in several squatter transformation projects, apparently erected the mosque in an attempt to transform the composition of the neighborhood from Alevi to Sunni.

¶8. (SBU) The mosque's construction has angered many long-time Alevi residents who resent attempts to create discord among Sunni and Alevi neighbors who have lived peacefully alongside one another for decades. Professor Erman commented that tensions ran high among residents during previous parliamentary elections because the Sunni and Alevi neighbors tended to be at opposite ends of the political spectrum. She feared that the mosque controversy might heighten tensions among residents during parliamentary elections later this year.

COMMENT

¶9. (SBU) While local governments have begun to implement measures to address squatter housing through large-scale urban renewal projects, they have largely ignored the social aspect of the squatter phenomenon in Turkey. Razing single-story houses in favor of high-rise apartments essentially destroys the village-like communal atmosphere squatters create in large urban centers such as Ankara. Opportunities for social networking among members of different ethnic and religious communities will diminish as families move to apartments, and this could increase tensions among these groups down the road. The destruction of communal space in squatter areas is designed to end the proliferation of unregulated, untitled housing. It is likely to reduce the clear sense of community and interdependence that exist in neighborhoods like the one we visited, perhaps condemning squatter residents to a more isolated, anonymous future.

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